



ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Fleecer WMA – Erickson Ranch Land Exchange and Grazing Plan

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
April 2009

Preface

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing a multi-facet project to benefit wildlife and winter range habitat on the eastern portion of the Fleecer Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and on the adjacent Erickson Ranch. The establishment and maintenance of the proposed grazing plan would allow cattle to be utilized as a management tool to remove less palatable residual vegetation from previous years on the WMA and adjacent private land and stimulate regrowth of native grasses and forbs for the benefit of wintering big game species. The Erickson Ranch would benefit from the availability of additional grazing areas for their cattle. The ability to manage big game winter range across the landscape, rather than just within the boundaries of the WMA, will allow FWP to more effectively manage wildlife populations and their habitat.

Proposed Action

FWP is proposing to approve the actions described in the Fleecer WMA-Erickson Ranch Land Exchange and Grazing Plan Environmental Assessment. Specifically, the project proposes the following actions on the WMA and a portion of the adjacent Erickson Ranch:

- Exchange one 40-acre parcel of state land (WMA) for one 40-acre parcel of the Erickson Ranch
- Establish a coordinated rest-rotation grazing plan for cattle on the WMA (~1200 acres) and a portion of native rangeland of the Erickson Ranch (~1500 acres) adjacent to the WMA
- Construct 6 miles of wildlife friendly fence and remove 3 miles of old fence within the WMA to define three grazing pastures
- Refurbish 2 existing stock water systems (water lines and tanks) and develop an additional stock water system (well, water lines, tank, solar power unit).

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an

Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on March 4, 2009.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through April 3, 2009). Legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte) and the *Anaconda Leader*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

Four parties submitted comments; three of those were on behalf of five groups and one was representing himself only. Of the four respondents, three were in support of the proposed action as-is while one supported the project but had several stated concerns.

The supporters of the Fleecer WMA-Erickson Ranch Land Exchange and Grazing Plan cited the following reasons for their support: 1) the mutual benefit to FWP and the Erickson Ranch with regards to the grazing plan; 2) the potential to improve big game winter range habitat across a broader landscape; and 3) that the parcels for the proposed land exchange are of equal assessed value and similar topography and vegetation.

Below is a summary of the comments received and FWP's response to them:

1) Request to coordinate an invasive plant control program.

One comment was received under this category. The respondent, an employee of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Butte Ranger District, expressed interest in developing a coordinated invasive plant species control program with FWP and possibly the Erickson Ranch in this area.

FWP response: FWP is amenable to this coordinated effort and will follow up on this suggestion.

2) Lack of quantitative evidence supporting the proposed action and its potential impacts to big game.

One comment was received under this category. The respondent felt that the impacts to big game from the proposed action to implement a grazing plan on a WMA lacked support from quantifiable data.

FWP response: While the Draft EA did not present specific information to support the assessment of impacts to big game populations when grazing plans are implemented on WMAs, quantifiable evidence of such does exist. Since the mid 1980's, grazing plans have been in place elsewhere on the Fleecer WMA and on the Mount Haggin WMA. Fixed photo points established at the onset of these grazing systems and repeated annually indicate that rest-rotation grazing on these WMAs has maintained or improved the amount or species composition of vegetation over the long-term and has helped to restore overused range conditions to those more amenable to wildlife populations, including big game species. Annual winter big game aerial surveys and ground surveys of Fleecer WMA near Divide, MT indicate that elk, antelope, and mule deer continue to use all portions of the WMA, even though a grazing plan has been in place there since 1988.

3) Lack of scoping process prior to issuance of the Draft EA

One comment was received under this category. The respondent noted that there was never a scoping a process conducted on this project prior to the issuance of the Draft EA. FWP response: While no formal scoping process was conducted on this project, Butte Area Wildlife Biologist discussed this project with local sportsmen's groups (Butte Skyline Sportsmen and Anaconda Sportsmen Association) prior to issuing the Draft EA. Both groups expressed early support for the project.

4) Commitment by FWP to implement a rigorous monitoring plan of the proposed grazing agreement.

One comment was received under this category. The respondent expressed support for the grazing plan and water developments contingent upon FWP's commitment to implement a statistically rigorous monitoring plan that will provide reliable data on elk and deer responses over the 3-year evaluation period before the grazing plan will be renewed.

FWP response: FWP has already begun implementation of such a monitoring plan. In 2007, fixed photo points and vegetation transects were established on the Fleecer WMA in the area of the proposed grazing plan and read to determine pre-treatment conditions. Photos will be taken from the fixed points every year and vegetation at the fixed transects will be evaluated on a 5-year basis, with the next reading to occur in 2012, prior to the end of the 3-year evaluation period. Annual big game winter surveys will continue to be flown over the area as they have been since the early 1980's. Pellet transects will be established across all pastures on the Fleecer WMA and the adjoining Erickson Ranch in the spring 2009 and will be read annually in the late spring after the snow has melted. These transects will provide data on big game winter use of these areas. FWP feels that data collected from each of these monitoring efforts will be sufficient to assess the effectiveness of the proposed grazing plan to providing benefits to wintering big game populations.

5) Surveys for nongame species.

One comment was received under this category. The respondent encourages FWP to initiate surveys of its properties to evaluate possibilities for enhancing non-game wildlife species.

FWP response: In an effort to be more comprehensive in our management of wildlife species, including non-game as well as game species, FWP's Region 3 recently hired a biologist to focus on non-game and other native wildlife species. One of the main responsibilities of this biologist will be to conduct small mammal and raptor surveys on the WMAs in Region 3 where grazing plans are in place. Surveys will commence this summer 2009, beginning with Wall Creek, Robb-Ledford, and Mount Haggin WMA, with the remainder of the WMAs with grazing plans to be completed in following years, including Fleecer-Erickson Ranch grazing plan.

6) Impacts to soil around water sources

One comment was received under this category. The respondent expressed concern for impacts to soil and vegetation where cattle concentrate around water sources and that such impacts should be monitored.

FWP response: FWP agrees that areas of cattle concentration should be monitored for long-term change and will establish permanent photo points at each water source in order to do so. To address an omission of impacts to vegetation, the following line has been added to the Final EA, Part II, Section 1-A, Table 4, footnote 4a/b:

“In addition, some loss of vegetation where cattle concentrate around water sources is likely to occur.”

7) Clarification on the Grazing Schedule

One comment was received under this category. The respondent correctly pointed out a discrepancy in the number of rested pastures on the Erickson Ranch per year. In the Draft EA, Part II, Section 1-B, Table 10, footnote 10e, it is stated that “one” pasture on the Erickson Ranch will be rested annually while the Grazing Schedule in Appendix A indicates that two pastures on the Ranch will be rested each year.

FWP response: The Grazing Schedule is correct and Footnote 10e in the Final EA has been edited to reflect this.

Final Environmental Assessment

Slight modifications to the Draft Environmental Assessment have been made as noted in the FWP response to comments above. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action for implementation of the Fleecer WMA-Erickson Ranch Land Exchange and Grazing Plan.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Patrick J. Flowers
Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Date